



Immigration, from One Evangelical to Another

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I want to tell you about a wonderful family our congregation has come to know and love. They migrated to San Francisco from south of the border at great risk to themselves, a long and perilous journey. Like so many others, they did so because the economic conditions in their homeland had become so bad that they could no longer meet basic needs. They entered the United States without proper documentation, not out of irresponsibility but, on the contrary, in response to the needs of their loved ones.

Although they've pieced together a livelihood, month to month, for several years now, they live in constant fear. Under our current enforcement policies, families like theirs are being precipitously torn apart, children separated indefinitely from their parents, husbands from their wives. A kindergartner at my child's school suffers from the trauma of having been held in a Houston detention facility for months, thousands of miles away from his mother. I listened recently to a family testify about federal agents entering their home under false pretenses, being told "Shut up, you f**king immigrants!" and hearing the screams of one family member who was handled with enough force to necessitate hospitalization.

The stories my Arizona friends tell me are worse. Their sheriff erected electrified pens, tent cities to detain thousands of immigrants last year. He has

reinstated "chain gangs" for men, women, and youth, sometimes marching them down the streets for public display. Just a few weeks ago, I heard that a mother of eight, suffering from diabetes, was thrown in jail simply for not having papers.

My friend, there are countless stories, in my city and yours, whether or not we dare to hear them. They are chilling stories of human cruelty that, regardless of where you or I might sit on the political spectrum, should bring us both to our knees before Jesus to seek his mind, heart, and marching orders for his church in such a time as this.

As followers of Christ, we are not constrained by the confines of political messaging.

As you may be aware, the national conversation about "comprehensive immigration reform" has been stirring, and the pundits and spin doctors are getting busy. But as followers of Christ, we are not constrained by the confines of political messaging. We know that the wisdom of man is the foolishness of God. And though we may have already learned to tune out the vitriolic banter of talking-head media, we must insist on going deeper, being careful, as Colossians warns, that no one take us captive through human philosophy or empty deception.

Friend, we must be prepared to hear those who will dismiss our call to "welcome the stranger" as well-meaning but naïve, at which point we must say, "You are right. A Christian response to immigration is not about compassion as much as it is about allegiance—to a God who sees his world and its inhabitants very differently than we do." If we consider the God of Genesis 1 abundance, or the Jesus who bewilderingly multiplies loaves

and fishes, then the politics of scarcity (e.g. "It's good to be charitable, but we simply can't absorb all these immigrants!") suddenly begins to lose its power.

We can also anticipate silence about the economic plight of our neighbors to the south (and east), for people—you and I included—are reluctant to discover our collective culpability for our neighbor's misery, especially if redress might come at the cost of our material comfort. Allegiance to the self-emptying Christ of Philippians, who calls us to look beyond our own interests, suggests that turning a blind eye to current international trade policies, which reinforce another nation's poverty, is profoundly unchristian.

We can probably assume that we will not agree on many of the fine points of immigration reform policy, a truly complex endeavor. But we can agree that when dehumanization prevails in our own backyard, we must be willing to ask ourselves if "submitting to our authorities" has more to do with convenience than obedience. Jesus calls us to give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's. Perhaps our problem is that we've failed to give attention to what actually belongs to God.

Friend, as we engage in the debate surrounding the current immigration crisis, let us commit to asking better questions—ones that begin with God and nothing else. Not the economy. Not our national security. Not our environment. Not our family's welfare. Only our God. And let's do this together, shall we? ■

Craig Wong (onbeingthechurch@gum.org) is the executive director of Grace Urban Ministries, a congregation-based non-profit located in San Francisco's Mission District that serves low-income families through academic tutoring, adult education, health services, and advocacy. Some resources on immigration can be found at www.gum.org/immigration.